

Research

Flanders DC spreads creativity bug

A productive and creative first working year yielding an excellent crop of tangible results is how Lorin Parys, General Manager of Flanders DC, and Bieke Dewulf, Manager of the Knowledge Centre, would sum up the past twelve months. If they have succeeded in conveying just a fraction of their entrepreneurial enthusiasm to executives, the government and the public at large, then the future looks bright for the Flemish economy!

Catalyst for a creative economy

Let's take a moment to remind ourselves what Flanders DC is all about. In February 2004 the Flemish government organised 'Flanders, District of Creativity', an inter-regional conference on the theme of entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation. Following this event the government turned its fine words into action by setting up the non-profit organisation Flanders DC in July 2004 with the aim of spurring economic growth in Flanders. According to a study in which Professor Leo Sleuwaegen and his team (2005) identified the challenges facing the Flemish economy, Flanders needs a creative growth model if it is to remain competitive. Flanders DC intends to translate this into practice through research and training, awareness-raising activities and international cooperation. In doing so it relies on three essential elements: entrepreneurship, innovation and internationalisation. To ensure the success of this venture, the Flemish government targeted the most important people working in the economic field in Flanders and brought them together in the Management Board of Flanders DC (see inset).

Research as a breeding ground

As one of the partners of Flanders DC, Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School was assigned the role of knowledge centre. Bieke Dewulf is well pleased with how the first working year has gone: "At first we had to search around a bit to muster all our researchers and expertise in entrepreneurship, innovation and internationalisation and organise them within a knowledge centre. In the meantime more than fifteen research projects have got under way, a few of which have already reached completion. The enthusiasm of our researchers, both in Leuven and in Ghent, has really given the research momentum." Most of the research projects last for six months to a year, although some macro-economic projects are spread over several years, with interim reports periodically published.

Since the structure of Flanders DC is highly pragmatic and the aim is to inject dynamism into the Flemish economy in the short term, research results are not destined to be buried in the archives of a select club; instead they are available to all interested parties via the portal site of Flanders DC and via the School's own website. This also applies to the practical tools developed by the School's various competence centres based on the research. Lorin Parys can already see the impact of the research: "It's important for us to publish concrete results quickly and we've already done quite well in that respect. One of our studies, for example,

examined how creative the economy is in our ‘central cities’¹. These results not only got a lot of press coverage; they were also incorporated into a policy document by the Flemish Minister for Urban Policy. We’ve since received requests from other towns and cities wanting to know how creative their economy is. This convinces us that this issue is seen as important in Flanders and that we’re on the right track. At the moment we’re also working with Professor Herman Van den Broeck in the People and Organisation competence centre on an on-line learning platform for business. This is a self-assessment tool – in the form of a strength-weakness analysis – that businesses can use to find out whether they have the necessary expertise in-house to be innovative.”

Inspiring

With partners such as Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, the Union of Independent Entrepreneurs (UNIZO), the Voka network of businesses, Flanders Investment & Trade (FIT), the Chambers of Commerce and the *Vlaams Agentschap Ondernemen* (VLAO, Flemish Enterprise Agency), Flanders DC is in direct contact with the Flemish business world. Each partner acts as a conduit, channelling the research, insights and tools generated in the knowledge centre to entrepreneurs and the general public. Lorin Parys again: “For example, once we’d finalised the ‘GPS for enterprises’, a brainstorming tool designed to initiate the innovation process in companies, we trained people from UNIZO, VLAO and the Chambers of Commerce. They, in turn, tell their members or customers what they’ve learnt.”

On the basis of the same philosophy, Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School incorporates the research results into its courses and is organising free sessions in the autumn for managers and entrepreneurs from all sectors under the general heading of ‘Creativity talks’, during which the individual research projects will be presented and best practices highlighted.

It is sometimes claimed that young people’s entrepreneurial spirit is nipped in the bud while they are studying. Together with Vlerick, Flanders DC put this to the test by launching the Winter Academy, a four-day event open to final-year students and recent graduates. Twenty-five high potentials all from different backgrounds were chosen out of more than 800 applicants for an intensive session of creativity and innovation. It was no stroll in the park, however: at the end of the four-day seminar the participants had to present a solid business plan that was not only creative and innovative but also practicable. “In Flanders we boast about being good at transferring ready knowledge,” explains Parys, “but putting that knowledge into practice does not always prove to be so easy. Often our mindset remains unchanged, which is why cross-fertilisation between different disciplines is really worthwhile. That’s where we often see real innovation.”

Raising awareness

Creative and innovative thinking is not just for high potentials. With the awareness campaign “You are Flanders’ Future”, Flanders DC wants to get everyone in society thinking, whether

¹ *Centrumsteden*: thirteen cities in the Flemish Region with an important regional servicing function.

they be self-employed, employees, scientists or executives. The campaign aims to foster a spirit of dynamism by pushing forward creative people as role models. Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School also believes firmly in this concept. Bieke Dewulf: “Based on the idea that people find it easier to emulate their peers, Professor Hans Crijns and his team have brought together a group of 25 successful and innovative entrepreneurs willing to share their stories. As Flanders DC Fellows they are being trained to convey their experience in an interesting and exciting way. The idea is that companies, organisations and schools will shortly be able to make constructive use of this group.”

Boundless creativity: the Creativity World Forum

Flanders DC wants to fire the creativity of Flemish people, while encouraging them to expand their horizons. Lorin Parys: “International cooperation is an important item on our agenda. In Flanders we sometimes find it hard to break through our parochial mentality. We often have the intrinsic skills but tend not to look beyond our own borders. That’s why we’ve conceived the idea of organising a Creativity World Forum every two years. The inaugural session was held in Leuven in 2004. In November this year we shall once again be bringing together business people, policy-makers and researchers from ten of the most competitive regions in the world to share experiences and best practices. Some of the well-known speakers at this year’s conference will be John Cleese, talking about how to create a creative environment, Dan Pink, who will examine which entrepreneurial skills will be crucial in the future, and Flemish scientist and businesswoman Sophie Vandebroek, Global CTO Xerox. Besides presentations by prominent professionals on the subject of innovation, workshops will be organised on three key themes: policy, research and business practice. The sessions will be academically underpinned but will also be practically oriented. Executives must come away with a checklist of ‘to do’s and pitfalls’. Another aim of the conference is to stimulate networking and in that respect we have something new up our sleeves. Upon arrival each delegate will be given an interactive hand-held device, which can be used to note appointments, send messages and check out the profiles of other delegates. So it’ll be impossible to miss out on an interesting contact!”

For further information, visit:

www.flandersdc.be

www.creativityworldforum.be

www.vlerick.be/flandersdc

www.creativitytalks.be (in Dutch only)

Partners of Flanders DC

Flanders Investment & Trade, IBBT, i-City, IWT, UNIZO, Flemish Community, Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School en Voka